

The Medieval Era

(800 - 1400 C.E.)

The Medieval Era is the longest and most remote period of musical history. It is important to note that this musical era consists of almost a thousand years worth of music. For most of the middle ages, the Church was the focal point of social life, learning, and the arts. Saint Gregory, who was pope from 590 - 640 C.E., is said to have organized a huge repertoire of chants that developed during the first centuries of the Christian church. Thus the term of "Gregorian Chant" came about.

Early Medieval music notation did not look like the notation that is used in present day music. The earliest signs of a notational system for music used neumes. For a long time, musical notation consisted of the *pitch* or note that was to be sung. Other musical notation, such as rhythm didn't begin until the 12th or 13th centuries.

Gregorian Chant is *monophonic*, having one melodic line without an accompaniment. It is said to be very serene, with pure shapes of melody. It is not known who wrote the melodies of the Gregorian Chant. Similar to folk melodies, it probably changed over time as it was passed down through generations.

Toward the latter part of the Middle Ages, music consisted of two or more melodic lines that were heard simultaneously, called *polyphony*. This appeared around the 1200s. Polyphony was more difficult to compose than the monophonic chant, because a composer had to combine multiple melodic lines in a way that would be pleasing to the listener. Most of the Medieval polyphonic music was anonymous, as the names of composers were never written down. However, there are a few exceptions, as some composers had works so important that their names were preserved along with their music.

Although little of it has been preserved, *secular* song was important to the medieval era. Secular song was monophonic and stylistically more diversified than plain song. It was stronger, and utilized regular rhythms, and had short rhythmic patterns. It was generally modal but favored major (Ionian) and minor (Aeolian) modes.

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